

the condition of education 2006



INDICATOR 19

Trends in Adult Literacy

The indicator and corresponding tables are taken directly from *The Condition of Education 2006*. Therefore, the page numbers may not be sequential.

Additional information about the survey data and supplementary notes can be found in the full report. For a copy of *The Condition of Education 2006*, visit the NCES website (<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.sap?pubid=2006071>) or contact ED PUBs at 1-877-4ED-PUBS.

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Adult Literacy

Trends in Adult Literacy

While the quantitative literacy of adults improved from 1992 to 2003, the prose and document literacy of adults was not measurably different between these two years.

Adults age 16 or older were assessed in three types of literacy (prose, document, and quantitative) in 1992 and 2003. Literacy is defined as “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” The average prose and document literacy scores of U.S. adults were not measurably different in 2003 from 1992, but the average quantitative literacy score increased 8 points between these years (see supplemental table 19-1).

Differences in average literacy were apparent by education and age. Educational attainment is positively related to all three types of literacy: those with a bachelor’s or higher degree outperformed their peers in 1992 and 2003. Between these years, average prose literacy decreased for all levels of educational attainment, and document literacy decreased among those with at least some college education or a bachelor’s or higher degree. From 1992 to 2003, the average prose, document, and quantitative literacy scores of adults ages 50–64 and 65 or older increased.

Additional differences in average literacy scores were apparent by race/ethnicity and sex. In

1992 and 2003, White and Asian/Pacific Islander adults had higher average scores than their Black and Hispanic peers in the three types of literacy assessed. The average scores of Blacks increased in each type of literacy from 1992 to 2003, while the average scores of Hispanics declined in prose and document literacy. Women scored higher than men on prose and document literacy in 2003, though men outperformed women on quantitative literacy. Male scores declined in prose and document literacy from 1992 to 2003, while female scores increased in document and quantitative literacy.

Another measure of literacy is the percentage of adults who perform at three achievement levels: *Basic*, *Intermediate*, and *Proficient*. In each type of literacy, 13 percent of adults were at or above *Proficient* (indicating they possess the skills necessary to perform complex and challenging literacy activities) in 2003 (see supplemental table 19-2). Fourteen percent of adults were *Below Basic* (indicating they possess no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills) in prose literacy, compared with 12 percent in document literacy and 22 percent in quantitative literacy.

¹ Included in this category are those still enrolled in high school. In 2003, this accounted for 3 percent of the total population age 16 or older.

NOTE: Prose literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to perform prose tasks (i.e., to search, comprehend, and use information from continuous texts, such as paragraphs from stories); document literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to perform document tasks (i.e., to search, comprehend, and use information from noncontinuous texts in various formats, such as bills or prescription labels); and quantitative literacy is the knowledge and skills required to perform quantitative tasks (i.e., to identify and perform computations, either alone or sequentially, using numbers embedded in printed materials). In 1992, respondents were allowed to identify only one race; in 2003, respondents were allowed to identify multiple races. Included in the total but not shown separately are American Indians/Alaska Natives and respondents with more than one race. Results are reported in terms of average scores on a 0–500 scale. To compare results between 1992 and 2003, the 1992 results were rescaled using the criteria and methods established for the 2003 assessment.

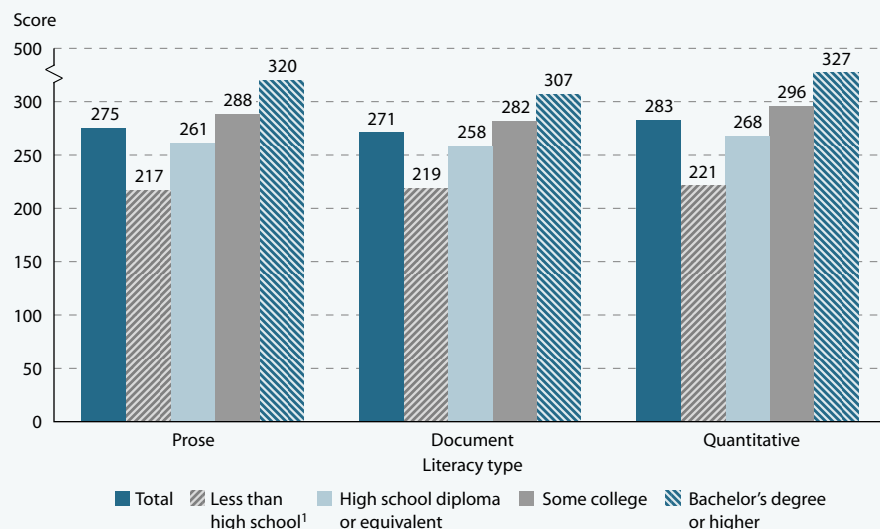
SOURCE: Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., and Baer, J. (2005). *A First Look at the Literacy of America’s Adults in the 21st Century* (NCES 2006-470), figure 1. Data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL).



FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Supplemental Notes 1, 3
Supplemental Tables 19-1,
19-2

NCES 2006-471

ADULT LITERACY PERFORMANCE: Average prose, document, and quantitative literacy scores of adults age 16 or older, by educational attainment: 2003



Trends in Adult Literacy

Table 19-1. Average prose, document, and quantitative literacy scores of adults age 16 or older, by selected characteristics: 1992 and 2003

Characteristic	Prose		Document		Quantitative	
	1992	2003	1992	2003	1992	2003
Total	276	275	271	271	275	283
Sex						
Male	276	272	274	269	283	286
Female	277	277	268	272	269	279
Race/ethnicity ¹						
White	287	288	281	282	288	297
Black	237	243	230	238	222	238
Hispanic	234	216	238	224	233	233
Asian/Pacific Islander	255	271	259	272	268	285
Age						
16–18	270	267	270	268	264	267
19–24	280	276	282	277	277	279
25–39	288	283	286	282	286	292
40–49	293	282	284	277	292	289
50–64	269	278	258	270	272	289
65 or older	235	248	221	235	235	257
Language spoken before starting school ²						
English only	282	283	275	276	280	289
English and Spanish	255	262	253	259	247	261
English and other language	273	278	260	268	271	289
Spanish	205	188	216	199	212	211
Other language	239	249	241	257	246	270
Education						
Less than high school ³	226	217	223	219	219	221
High school diploma or equivalent	267	261	261	258	267	268
Some college	295	288	291	282	296	296
Bachelor's degree or higher	332	320	322	307	330	327
Employment status						
Employed full time	290	285	286	281	292	296
Employed part time	285	281	279	277	281	287
Unemployed	263	269	261	265	261	270
Not in labor force	252	255	244	250	247	261

¹ Black includes African American, Hispanic includes Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander includes Native Hawaiian. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin unless specified. In 1992, respondents were allowed to identify only one race; in 2003, respondents were allowed to identify multiple races. Included in the total but not shown separately are American Indians/Alaska Natives and respondents with more than one race.

² The "English and Spanish" category includes adults who spoke only English and Spanish as well as adults who spoke English, Spanish, and another language(s). The "Spanish" category includes adults who spoke only Spanish as well as adults who spoke Spanish and another non-English language(s). The "other language" category includes only adults who spoke neither English nor Spanish.

³ Included in this category are those still enrolled in high school. In 2003, this accounted for 3 percent of the total population age 16 or older.

NOTE: Prose literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to perform prose tasks (i.e., to search, comprehend, and use information from continuous texts, such as paragraphs from stories); document literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to perform document tasks (i.e., to search, comprehend, and use information from noncontinuous texts in various formats, such as bills or prescription labels); and quantitative literacy is the knowledge and skills required to perform quantitative tasks (i.e., to identify and perform computations, either alone or sequentially, using numbers embedded in printed materials). To compare results between 1992 and 2003, the 1992 results were rescaled using the criteria and methods established for the 2003 assessment.

SOURCE: Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., and Baer, J. (2005). *A First Look at the Literacy of America's Adults in the 21st Century* (NCES 2006-470), figures 1, 4, 11, 14, and 18 and previously unpublished tabulation (December 2005). Data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) and 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS).

Trends in Adult Literacy

Table 19-2. Percentage of adults age 16 or older in each prose, document, and quantitative literacy achievement level, by selected characteristics: 2003

Characteristic	Prose				Document				Quantitative			
	Below Basic	Basic	Inter-mediate	Proficient	Below Basic	Basic	Inter-mediate	Proficient	Below Basic	Basic	Inter-mediate	Proficient
Total	14	29	44	13	12	22	53	13	22	33	33	13
Sex												
Male	15	29	43	13	14	23	51	13	21	31	33	16
Female	12	29	46	14	11	22	54	13	22	35	32	11
Race/ethnicity ¹												
White	7	25	51	17	8	19	58	15	13	32	39	17
Black	24	43	31	2	24	35	40	2	47	36	15	2
Hispanic	44	30	23	4	36	26	33	5	50	29	17	4
Asian/Pacific Islander	14	32	42	12	11	22	54	13	19	34	35	12
Age												
16–18	11	37	48	5	11	24	56	9	28	38	28	6
19–24	11	29	48	12	9	20	58	13	21	36	33	10
25–39	12	25	45	18	8	19	56	17	17	31	35	17
40–49	11	27	47	15	10	20	54	15	19	32	34	16
50–64	13	27	44	15	12	23	54	12	19	30	34	17
65 or older	23	38	34	4	27	33	38	3	34	37	24	5
Language spoken before starting school ²												
English only	9	27	49	15	9	21	56	13	18	33	35	15
English and Spanish	14	38	42	6	12	29	54	5!	31	39	26	4!
English and other language	7	33	51	9	10	25	57	8	15	38	34	14
Spanish	61	25	13	1	49	25	23	3	62	25	11	2
Other language	26	33	34	7	20	24	46	10	28	33	29	10
Education												
Less than high school ³	44	34	21	2	38	28	30	4	58	28	13	2
High school diploma or equivalent	12	40	44	4	13	30	53	5	25	42	29	4
Some college	6	25	56	13	5	19	64	12	10	34	43	13
Bachelor's degree or higher	2	12	51	35	2	10	61	28	3	20	43	33

! Interpret data with caution (estimates are unstable).

¹ Black includes African American, Hispanic includes Latino, and Asian/Pacific Islander includes Native Hawaiian. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin unless specified. In 1992, respondents were allowed to identify only one race; in 2003, respondents were allowed to identify multiple races. Included in the total but not shown separately are American Indians/Alaska Natives and respondents with more than one race.

² The "English and Spanish" category includes adults who spoke only English and Spanish as well as adults who spoke English, Spanish, and another language(s). The "Spanish" category includes adults who spoke only Spanish as well as adults who spoke Spanish and another non-English language(s). The "other language" category includes only adults who spoke neither English nor Spanish.

³ Included in this category are those still enrolled in high school. In 2003, this accounted for 3 percent of the total population age 16 or older.

NOTE: Prose literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to perform prose tasks (i.e., to search, comprehend, and use information from continuous texts, such as paragraphs from stories); document literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to perform document tasks (i.e., to search, comprehend, and use information from noncontinuous texts in various formats, such as bills or prescription labels); and quantitative literacy is the knowledge and skills required to perform quantitative tasks (i.e., to identify and perform computations, either alone or sequentially, using numbers embedded in printed materials). Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding.

SOURCE: Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., and Baer, J. (2005). *A First Look at the Literacy of America's Adults in the 21st Century* (NCES 2006-470), figures 2, 5–10, 12, 13, 15, and 16 and previously unpublished tabulation (December 2005). Data from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL).

Trends in Adult Literacy

Table S19. Standard errors for the average prose, document, and quantitative literacy scores of adults age 16 or older, by educational attainment: 2003

Educational attainment	Prose	Document	Quantitative
Total	1.3	1.2	1.2
Less than high school	2.3	2.4	2.1
High school diploma or equivalent	1.1	1.3	1.4
Some college	1.5	1.3	1.4
Bachelor's degree or higher	1.8	1.4	1.2

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), previously unpublished tabulation (December 2005).

Trends in Adult Literacy

Table S19-1. Standard errors for the average prose, document, and quantitative literacy scores of adults age 16 or older, by selected characteristics: 1992 and 2003

Characteristic	Prose		Document		Quantitative	
	1992	2003	1992	2003	1992	2003
Total	1.1	1.3	1.1	1.2	1.1	1.2
Sex						
Male	1.2	1.5	1.2	1.5	1.4	1.3
Female	1.3	1.4	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.3
Race/ethnicity						
White	1.2	1.5	1.2	1.5	1.1	1.3
Black	1.4	1.8	1.4	2.1	1.6	2.1
Hispanic	2.3	3.5	1.8	3.6	2.3	3.2
Asian/Pacific Islander	6.1	4.0	6.1	5.0	7.8	5.1
Age						
16–18	2.3	2.8	2.2	2.9	2.5	3.1
19–24	2.0	2.4	2.2	2.5	2.0	2.3
25–39	1.3	1.7	1.2	1.8	1.3	1.8
40–49	2.0	2.3	1.9	1.8	1.8	1.9
50–64	1.4	1.9	1.4	2.1	1.8	1.9
65 or older	1.7	2.0	2.2	2.0	2.7	2.2
Language spoken before starting school						
English only	1.2	1.4	1.2	1.3	1.2	1.2
English and Spanish	2.9	3.1	3.6	3.4	4.6	3.8
English and other language	4.0	3.1	4.5	3.2	5.6	4.1
Spanish	2.9	3.8	2.8	4.6	3.3	4.6
Other language	3.4	4.6	3.7	4.2	4.3	4.3
Education						
Less than high school	1.3	2.3	1.5	2.4	1.9	2.1
High school diploma or equivalent	1.0	1.1	1.3	1.3	1.1	1.4
Some college	1.2	1.5	1.3	1.3	1.3	1.4
Bachelor's degree or higher	1.5	1.8	1.4	1.4	1.4	1.2
Employment status						
Employed full time	1.3	1.5	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.1
Employed part time	1.7	2.2	1.8	2.2	1.7	2.2
Unemployed	2.3	2.8	2.2	3.3	3.2	3.6
Not in labor force	1.4	1.7	1.5	1.9	1.9	1.8

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) and 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), previously unpublished tabulation (December 2005).

Trends in Adult Literacy

Table S19-2. Standard errors for the percentage of adults age 16 or older in each prose, document, and quantitative literacy achievement level, by selected characteristics: 2003

Characteristic	Prose				Document				Quantitative			
	Below Basic	Basic	Inter-mediate	Proficient	Below Basic	Basic	Inter-mediate	Proficient	Below Basic	Basic	Inter-mediate	Proficient
Total	0.6	0.6	0.7	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.5
Sex												
Male	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.6
Female	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.8	0.6	0.8	0.7	0.7	0.6
Race/ethnicity												
White	0.5	0.8	0.9	0.9	0.5	0.7	1.0	1.0	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.8
Black	1.4	1.2	1.4	0.4	1.7	1.4	1.9	0.5	1.8	1.3	1.1	0.4
Hispanic	1.8	1.0	1.1	0.4	1.6	0.8	1.2	0.5	1.7	0.9	0.9	0.5
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.0	2.2	2.5	1.8	2.2	2.1	3.0	2.3	3.0	2.9	2.8	2.5
Age												
16–18	1.7	2.5	2.7	1.4	1.4	1.8	2.4	1.7	2.3	2.1	2.1	1.3
19–24	1.1	1.3	1.5	1.1	1.1	1.2	1.7	1.5	1.4	1.3	1.4	1.1
25–39	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.7	1.1	1.1	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.9
40–49	0.9	1.1	1.2	1.1	0.7	0.8	1.1	0.9	0.9	0.8	0.8	0.9
50–64	0.8	0.9	1.1	0.8	0.9	0.9	1.2	1.1	1.0	0.8	0.9	0.8
65 or older	1.3	1.2	1.4	0.6	1.5	1.0	1.4	0.4	1.6	1.2	1.2	0.6
Language spoken before starting school												
English only	0.5	0.7	0.8	0.7	0.5	0.6	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6
English and Spanish	2.1	2.2	2.4	1.3	2.5	3.0	3.8	1.8	3.3	2.6	2.8	1.3
English and other language	1.5	2.8	3.1	2.1	2.0	2.3	2.9	2.0	2.7	2.7	3.0	2.6
Spanish	1.8	1.1	0.9	0.3	2.0	1.0	1.3	0.4	2.2	1.2	1.1	0.5
Other language	2.2	2.0	2.3	1.3	1.9	1.3	2.0	1.2	2.3	1.7	1.9	1.5
Education												
Less than high school	1.4	0.9	1.0	0.3	1.3	0.7	1.0	0.4	1.2	0.8	0.7	0.3
High school diploma or equivalent	0.9	1.2	1.3	0.5	0.9	1.0	1.3	0.7	1.3	1.2	1.2	0.6
Some college	0.6	1.1	1.3	1.1	0.5	1.0	1.3	1.1	0.9	1.3	1.3	1.2
Bachelor's degree or higher	0.4	0.8	1.5	1.6	0.3	0.7	1.7	1.8	0.4	0.8	1.1	1.4

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), previously unpublished tabulation (December 2005).